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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

RUEHXD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000282

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#) [SOCI](#)

SUBJECT: MOSCOW CHABAD NOT INTERESTED IN SCHNEERSOHN COLLECTION

REF: A. 08 MOSCOW 2696

[B.](#) 04 MOSCOW 7059

**11.** (SBU) Summary. In a February 2 visit to the Russian State Library to view the Schneersohn Collection of sacred religious texts of the Chabad Lubavitch branch of Judaism, Director of the Library's Oriental Center Sergey Kukushkin told us that Moscow Chabad leaders had not visited the Collection in many years. Kukushkin claimed to know nothing about recent legal developments in the U.S. District Court in Washington surrounding the documents, and seemed surprised to hear that some documents from the Collection allegedly were found in Israel. Estimating that only 150-250 guests make appointments to see the texts each year, Kukushkin considered the rarely-handled documents to be in good condition, yet characterized the storage facility as only adequate. End Summary.

Schneersohn Collection Rarely Has Visitors

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**12.** (SBU) On February 2, PolOff visited the Russian State Military Archives (RSMA) in central Moscow and met with RSMA Director Sergey Kukushkin to observe the condition of the Schneersohn Collection, a compilation of 12,000 books and 50,000 rare documents considered to be sacred by the Chabad Lubavitch (Chabad) branch of Judaism. The Russian Government has possessed the Schneersohn Collection since 1945, much to the dismay of Chabad leaders in the United States who have called for its return to Chabad's headquarters in New York. The Russian Government has housed the documents in a small room (approximately 10 feet by 25 feet) in a wing of the library, locking the books behind glass doors on plywood shelves. The Chabad community's most recent thrust to recover the Schneersohn Collection centers on a legal proceeding in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, in which a federal judge ordered the Russian government to protect the Schneersohn documents and return any that had been removed. Kukushkin shrugged when asked about the possible impact of the current lawsuit in the States, saying that he was not aware of the case. However, he candidly stated that he and his Russian government counterparts vividly remembered past efforts by (then) Vice President Gore and Members of Congress to negotiate a return of the books, and he doubted this effort would yield better results.

**13.** (SBU) Kukushkin told us that Chief Rabbi of Moscow and Chabad Lubavitch leader Beryl Lazar (Ref A) had not visited the Schneersohn Collection in "many years," which tracks with Lazar's own reluctance to get involved in the contentious issue. Kukushkin noted that other top Jewish leaders in Russia, including competing Chief Rabbi of Russia Adolf Shayevich and Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt, also have not expressed interest in the collection of religious documents, nor have they offered to provide financial donations for its preservation. He estimated that approximately 150-250 religious scholars and parishioners visit the Collection annually, with occasional visits from Jewish school groups who come to see the books firsthand.

During our visit, the library's renovated reading room adjoining the storage area for the Schneersohn Collection was locked and empty. (Note: The library boasts refurbished regional study halls for the CIS, Far East, Middle East, and Africa, but all of these rooms were also locked and empty. End Note)

No Information on Black Market Books

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¶4. (SBU) Kukushkin seemed surprised to hear our account of press reports about Schneersohn Collection documents allegedly turning up in Israel, and assessed the condition of the Collection to be "the same as it was ten years ago," underlining that the books are old but in good shape. He claimed to be unaware of the recent news piece in the Associated Press about the alleged attempt to sell illegally Collection excerpts in Israel, professing that only he and his deputy hold the keys to the storage room and that there have been no break-ins or planned shipments. He noted that almost half of the documents are kept in a separate warehouse in Khimki (northern suburb of Moscow) because of storage constraints at the RSMA. Kukushkin hesitated to speculate on the reason for these stories, but felt convinced that an expert review of the texts would prove the stories false. While he characterized the storage conditions of the Schneersohn Collection as adequate, he also pointed to the poor shelving used by the library as an opportunity for improvement. Kukushkin did not expect that the economic crisis would affect the level of care provided to the Collection since the library's budget had been already confirmed.

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Comment

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¶5. (SBU) The Moscow-based Chabad community, led by Rabbi Lazar, continues to avoid confrontation with the Russian government over the Schneersohn Collection, an issue Lazar predicted in 2004 would become increasingly complex (Ref B).  
BEYRLE